

Dr Brian Roy Stuckenberg (1930–2009)

Dr Brian Stuckenberg, who was a distinguished entomologist and Director Emeritus of the Natal Museum, died in February 2009 at the age of 78. He was born and grew up in the Eastern Cape, and at a young age his interest in zoology was encouraged by Dr John Pringle, then director of the Port Elizabeth Museum and Snake Park. He studied at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, and obtained with distinction an MSc degree in entomology. In 1953 he was appointed assistant professional officer at the Natal Museum in Pietermaritzburg, where John Pringle was now Director. In 1972 he was awarded a doctorate by the University of Natal, and in 1976 when John Pringle retired Brian Stuckenberg succeeded him as Director at the age of 43.

Shortly after he came to Pietermaritzburg he met and married Pam Usher, then a senior zoology student at the university,

who would later accompany him on many collection trips, assist him in his work in many other ways, and classify the museum's collection of tabanid flies on which she herself became an acknowledged expert.

Brian Stuckenberg had decided to specialise in Diptera – the huge Order of two-winged insects generally called flies – knowing that this was a group that had not been adequately studied and classified, and that it had great significance for agriculture, animal husbandry and other human activities. During his twenty years as head of the Department of Entomology he emerged as the leading dipterist in Africa, and built up one of the largest collections of Afrotropical flies in the world. It has become an invaluable resource for researchers from many countries, and is known as The Brian Stuckenberg Collection. His fieldwork and publications



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were extensive, and by 1993 more than a hundred taxa had been named after him. Among the previously unknown species he discovered and described was the fossil remains of a bloodsucking fly *Paleoarthrocles mesozoicus* dated at more than 175 million years, which pushed back the age of the oldest known dipteran fossil record by over 100 million years. The quality of his research was later given international recognition by his being made an honorary member of the International Congress of Dipterology – at the time only the fourth person ever to be honoured in this way.

He believed passionately in the educational role of museums, especially in communities where the school system was inadequate, and under his leadership the institution's education department became a unit that not only welcomed increasing numbers of children to the museum, but actively took the services of the museum out into the community, and especially to the deprived areas around Pietermaritzburg. The Natal Museum was increasingly seen not as an alien and perhaps even intimidating place, but as one where ordinary people, children and

adults, could be comfortable and even feel a sense of ownership. In 1990 Stuckenberg visited museums in the United States, mainly those that excelled in presenting science and technology to children, and what he saw resulted in innovations and new directions at the Natal Museum.

His editorship of the *Annals of the Natal Museum*, several months as Acting Director when Dr Pringle was on long leave, his active involvement in broad museological issues and the South African Museums Association, and his eighteen years as Director inevitably reduced the time Stuckenberg could devote to his entomological studies, but he nevertheless kept up his research output. Nor were diptera his only focus of professional interest. The acquisition by the museum of some bronze cannons and other artefacts from the Portuguese ship the *Santiago*, wrecked in the Mozambique Channel in 1585, led him into marine archaeology and a general study of Portuguese voyages of exploration off the south eastern coast of Africa. In 1998 his paper entitled 'The location and identity of the *Baixos da Judia*: Portuguese historical cartography of the Mozambique Channel and its relevance to the wreck of the *Santiago* in 1585' was joint winner of the Almirante Teixeira da Mota Prize awarded by the National Maritime Academy of Portugal, and he was further honoured by being elected a member of that body.

That Brian Stuckenberg the entomologist should successfully undertake historical research is not surprising. His interests were wide-ranging, and he brought to them a remarkable intellectual curiosity. His directorship at the Museum was characterised by his enthusiastic and informed encouragement and support of the work in all its research departments. Anyone, whether museum staff or not, could be sure of his careful interest in any object, idea or

problem they brought to his attention. At a gathering of family, friends and colleagues the week after his death, several spoke of their association with him, and a recurring theme was the way in which Brian Stuckenberg's personal interest and insight into what they were doing had a significant impact on their lives and careers.

He was a shy man, but realising that his position as Director made him something of a public figure and would require him to speak at various gatherings, he consciously developed his speaking skills. He became an entertaining and sought-after speaker whose diffidence and modesty could hardly conceal the immense authority with which he could speak on a range of topics.

After his retirement in 1994 he continued to work at the Museum as Honorary Keeper of Entomology, once more able to devote all his time to his specialist research. The Natal Museum celebrated its centenary in 2004, and Brian Stuckenberg had been at the institution for more than half of that time. It is interesting to note that his period of service overlapped by a few years in the 1950s with that of Alfred Cullingworth, a clerical and technical assistant who joined the Museum at its inception. Together they provided a century-long living oral tradition which can surely be matched by few institutions.

Dr Stuckenberg is survived by his wife Pam, two daughters and a son.

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